Stanford eCorner

The Scientist vs. the Entrepreneur

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At the heart of scientific research is innovation, says Fodor, which is also one of the main driving forces behind entrepreneurship. He talks about making the transition from scientist to entrepreneur.

Transcript

So the question is, how do you mix the roles between entrepreneurs and science.. Just straight it up.. I don't know.. It was never with a big plan, either than a pretty clear vision of what it is that we really want to accomplish.. What happens overtime is an organizational reluctance to take risks.. That is, it turns out, the company grows, something that you really, really have to manage.. Because what happens is, because of budgets and because of resumes and so on, there tends to be much, much more focus on, 'Okay, can we afford to do this?' or 'Can we afford to do that?' And that is not a good climate for basic research and science.. Basic research and science, I think you want to know what your budget is, and then you will work with it or you can try to add to it.. And so, you know, personally, so you know, all the science and innovations does not become just a victim of quarter to quarter revenues and growth of the company.. A couple of years ago, we set up this thing called Affy Labs..

And there, we set it up as a totally separate, sort of scientific organization, and every year, we actually funded to a certain level.. They are guaranteed funded, year after year.. And what happens is the scientists within the Affy Labs know what the budget is and if they want to go beyond that budget, we really encourage people to like grants, it keeps them competitive.. And we've actually grown the science and technology budget substantially and that actually turns out to be a really good innovation engine to keep the whole thing going.. And so overtime, for me personally, you know, that's sort of my job, is that we build a very, very strong core technology, science and technology engine and then we're feeding these businesses.. Now I should mention, you know, the two big product lines in life sciences today and really to look at these RNA expression area and then the big growing in another area that's coming out fast is this whole screening of human polymorphisms across the populations.. That's actually a very, very rapidly growing part of our business.. At the same time, there are lots of other opportunities.. For example in diagnostics.. What we decided to do in diagnostics is instead of going sort of vertical, with sales force and all these people in diagnostics, we took what we call, it's like an Intel Inside model where we go to the big diagnostic companies of the world and we actually sell them the chips to go into their tests and they go out and market them just like sort of an Intel model..

We call it Power Bioffy because you can't call it Affy Inside.. But it's that sort of model.. And you know, overtime, some of these new areas for example in an infectious disease monitoring, we're just completing a pretty large clinical study where actually we're doing monitoring what are the infectious organisms that a person harbors? And so we're doing about a 10,000 people in this big clinical study to monitor what is the bacterial flora that each person harbors.. And so you can actually start to do population dynamics of the bacteria that each person carries and how is that moving through the population.. And at the same time, you can start to look at white blood cell changes and so on to tell whether or not there's an increase symptomatic indications of sickness.. So again, environmental monitoring, infectious disease, these diagnostics markets, as well as going vertically in sort of life sciences with DNA products and RNA products, you have to build a really, really strong technology engine and then keep that somewhat separate, although connected in terms of what are the market opportunities that you can go after.. And that's kind of how we juggle that right now and that's how I do it personally...